

PROJECT ELI: Improving EARLY LITERACY Outcomes

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The authors describe the components of their preschool's Project ELI, an effective and efficient early literacy and language initiative that has proved successful since its implementation six years ago.

An early literacy and language initiative that works.

Early childhood and elementary-level educators are engaging in conversations about how to coordinate their efforts to develop fluent readers. There is evidence that key early literacy skills that are predictive of subsequent literacy achievement in kindergarten and first grade can be taught to preschool-age children. Moreover, early childhood instruction and specially designed experiences can mitigate the development of learning disabilities in reading and enhance school readiness. One of the critical factors in addressing language and literacy skills at the preschool level is administrative leadership and support leading to the development and implementation of an early literacy and language model.





Through development, implementation, and evaluation of Project ELI (Early Literacy Initiative) in our early childhood program during the past six years, we have been teaching our preschool children the early literacy and language skills necessary for later reading success. Furthermore, our project has led to collaborative efforts between principals and staffs at both levels regarding ways to meet the needs of individual children as they transition from preschool to kindergarten; and we are improving our programmatic link between the levels through districtwide curriculum alignment and staff development. The purpose of this article is to describe 10 components of an effective and efficient early literacy and language initiative. The components, which follow a three-tier system, were designed so principals and administrative teams at both levels can be prepared to collaborate knowledgeably with one another on cross-program efforts to develop fluent readers.

1. Decide which skills should be taught.

A review of studies on early literacy and language skills conducted by the National Early Literacy Panel revealed that the following skills are predictive of later reading success and should be targeted for instruction in the early childhood years:

Phonological awareness. An understanding that spoken language is composed

of various smaller sound units and those smaller units can be manipulated.

Alphabet knowledge. An understanding that the printed letters represent the sounds in our spoken language, the letters can be combined to make words, and words can be put together to make sentences.

Name writing and invented spelling. An understanding that tools (e.g., keyboard, markers, crayons) can be used to create the individual printed symbols that in combination correspond to each child's spoken name.

Concepts about print. An understanding of the front and back of a book, and that we read letters and words from left to right and top to bottom on a page. Additionally, children need to know how the words on each page are linked to the pictures and illustrations.

Oral language. Fluent readers are those children who have strong vocabularies and experiential backgrounds that can be drawn upon when they are engaged in a reading activity.

2. Create or adopt an early literacy and language development model and embed it within an initiative. We are a community preschool administered by a K-12 school district for the benefit of our preschool-age children. In our program, we have 21 classrooms with morning and afternoon sessions that include tuition-paying students, plus pre-K at-risk students and children with disabilities. Our teachers are certified

in general preschool practices as well as early childhood special education. The building's leadership team, under the guidance of the principal and assistant principal, has built-in programwide planning time for curricular review and individual and team planning times for developing units of study. With this start, we put into place a set of assessment activities that link three instructional tiers through a data-based, problem-solving process (i.e., problem analysis, generation of alternatives, plan implementation, and plan evaluation). With this model, we are helping children develop the essential early literacy and language skills they need to become fluent readers.

To make this project sustainable, we continued to develop long-term goals with various stakeholders (e.g., general and special education curriculum supervisors, superintendent, and school board); developed collaborations with university colleagues who brought instructional, curricular, and data-analysis expertise to the project; and obtained minigrant funding from a statewide administrative professional group. The project has become increasingly institutionalized each year, due to conscientious planning efforts by our early childhood administrative team.

3. Develop universal curriculum and instruction (Tier 1). Our first step was to examine our current curriculum and determine how well we were addressing key early language and literacy skills through our universal practices. An analysis of demographic and student outcome data revealed that our teachers needed to address early language and literacy skills more intentionally. Next, we developed a decision-making rubric for comparing and contrasting a variety of research-based early language and literacy curricula. We decided to continue using the Creative Curriculum for Preschoolers as a universal curriculum, and to augment it with several specific early language and literacy curricula.

Once we decided on a scope and sequence of instruction, and matched

instructional strategies, we pulled together resources to put these universal strategies in place in school and at home. We stepped up our efforts to link with our families by speaking at a PTA meeting on literacy development and renewing staff interest in a "book buddy" program to route books with accompanying materials to families. We also hold one evening event for families that is designed specifically to highlight our children's growth in early literacy and language skills.

4. Provide training and support for embedded strategies and intentional teaching (Tier 1). As the second step in developing our Tier 1 universal strategies, the teachers completed an evaluation of their classroom, using the Early Language and Literacy Checklist Observation (Smith, Dickinson, Sangeorge, & Anastasopoulos, 2002). This tool measures the quality and quantity of materials and teacher-child interactions that support early language and literacy in the classroom environment. Each teacher then developed a classroom improvement plan that identified materials and inservice training needed to improve the language and literacy aspects of their classroom. These were reviewed with the principal, who then approved the purchase of materials and procured training as needed.

Third, each teacher developed strategies to embed opportunities for children to receive guided instruction and to practice early language and literacy skills within daily activities and routines. For example, they added reporting forms to the science center so children could record the results of their experiments, and they practiced rhyming and alliteration during morning circle. Some of the strategies and materials were selected from the adopted early language and literacy curricula and others were developed through brainstorming during team meetings. The teams also identified specific teaching strategies and adaptations needed for individual children (e.g., children who were learning English or children with special needs).

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During monthly meetings, team members reviewed progress, shared information about successful strategies, and brainstormed solutions to problems that one or more team members may have experienced. A final important part of our Tier 1 curricular and instructional practices was continuous progress monitoring, which led to the development of a decision model to identify children at risk and Tier 2 intervention strategies.

5. Engage in decision-making for groups and individual children (stay at Tier 1 or move to Tier 2). To monitor the children's progress in all three tiers, we adopted the early literacy and language Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs). This is a general outcome measurement system that includes three tasks: alliteration (matching pictures that start with the same sound in two minutes), picture naming (naming pictures in a flashcard format in one minute), and rhyming (matching pictures by those that rhyme in two minutes). The tasks were designed by some of the same individuals who developed the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, and the IGDIs were designed to be downward extensions of these skills. Therefore, they are reliable and valid measures that can be readministered monthly, are quick and easy to administer, sensitive to growth over time, and are linked to other data collection systems used in our district to monitor children's academic growth. We conduct the IGDIs in September, January, and May to monitor children's growth of essential early literacy and language skills. Four-year-old children who score at or below the 25th percentiles on our local norms by January, and those children who have slower-

than-average growth patterns, are considered candidates for movement into Tier 2 instruction.

Although the IGDIs can help monitor the children's progress, they were not designed to be prescriptive; therefore, we developed a separate checklist to be completed by the classroom team to determine which skills needed more individualized instruction. Based on a review of the skills that individual children and groups of children needed, each teacher developed customized Tier 2 interventions for their classrooms.

6. Design more intensive teacher-directed instruction and deliver it (Tier 2). The second tier of our model was designed to provide children who were identified as at risk on any one of the IGDI assessments with more intensive, explicit, and individualized, yet developmentally appropriate, instruction in early language and literacy skills. As with Tier 1 instruction, classroom teachers developed their own plans for providing teacher-instituted practice sessions in their classrooms. Some teachers provided instruction in small groups or individually and added adapted materials and activities, while others provided preteaching (e.g., before reading a book to the large group, reading it individually with a child and talking about new vocabulary words), and others adopted specific early language and literacy curricula (McCormick, Throneburg, & Smitley, 2002). The teachers also developed simple activities for families to employ that specifically addressed the skills they identified as needed for individual children.

7. Monitor progress; modify intervention and move to most intensive support (Tier 2). We continued to monitor the children's progress on the IGDIs and conducted daily and weekly performance checks of targeted skills in a discrete trial format. Depending on the child's IGDI scores and the accuracy rates on targeted skills during classroom performance, the child might move back to the universal instruction of Tier 1, continue with the Tier 2 interventions, or move into an intervention level of higher intensity (Tier 3).

8. Design and implement more intensive interventions for struggling students (Tier 3). Intervention at the third tier is more individualized and staff-/time-intensive than in the Tier 2 intervention. The intervention may be provided in even smaller groups than in Tier 2, staff specialists may be involved, and determination of targeted skills and instructional/therapeutic methods and progress-monitoring schemes may be more customized. For example, we recently provided a scripted rhyming intervention to five children (three community students and two with individualized education programs) in one afternoon class who, despite regular engagement in Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction, had not made any progress in rhyming from January to April.

The intervention included a teacher-delivered script blending the onset-rime format in a model-test-lead format: Teacher: "/p/ /ig/ says 'pig'"; then the students and teachers do it together; then the students respond on their own; then they generalize without a model to /d/ /ig/.

The children were grouped by twos or threes and the intervention took place in the classroom during a free choice time, twice a week for six minutes a day for three weeks. Depending on the children's attendance, they received an intervention "dosage" of 24 to 36 minutes. In the follow-up IGDl assessment, all of the community children had moved above the "struggling student" criteria and into the middle of the average range on rhyming. Individual turns during a generalization test at the end of the intervention also indicated that these students were able to apply the skills to novel words at a mastery level.

9. Monitor and continue examining program options on an individualized basis (Tier 3). Within the third tier, some students will still struggle to gain mastery of essential skills. Using a collaborative problem-solving model, the classroom team can identify other ways to meet the child's needs. For example, some students may need a stronger dosage of intervention, including one-on-one

therapy with a speech-language pathologist, individualized instruction on a daily basis, and more prescribed/scripted instruction throughout the day, than most students need to be successful.

10. Link with elementary schools about outcomes for individual children, groups of children, and the entire program. We are still in the process of finding ways to share with elementary principals and their staffs the information we are gathering on individual children, groups of children, and our program as a whole. Since our IGDl data are entered into a database, staff members at each child's home school can see how their children are performing at the preschool level. Last year, we shared data on individual children during individual education program meetings with staff from their home elementary buildings to determine special education eligibility and develop individual education programs. We are also looking at ways to examine our programwide database to better identify groups of children by demographic characteristics who may need more intensive instruction and more frequent progress monitoring once they get to the elementary level, and to share that information with the principals of our Title I schools.

We hope that our efforts to establish and maintain effective and efficient early literacy instruction through a programwide initiative, guided by our school principal and building leadership team, can start productive conversations with administrative colleagues and educators about ways to work collaboratively to achieve reading fluency for all children. □

References

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WEB RESOURCES

This site, maintained by the University of Minnesota, provides the Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) used to measure and monitor the progress of students.
<http://ggg.umn.edu>

The National Institute for Literacy makes available publications that offer advice on how to recognize preschool activities that start children on the road to becoming readers.
www.nifl.gov

The objective of the National Early Literacy Panel is to identify interventions and practices that promote positive outcomes in literacy for preschool children.
www.nifl.gov/nifl/NELP2007.html



